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Translating Gauguin's *Maison du Jouir*

 **Graham macLachlan**

Une fois n'est pas coutume, Traduire vous propose une réflexion en VO. Que doit faire le traducteur anglophone confronté aux différentes nuances d'un mot français tel que la jouissance ? Quelques pistes dans cet article, autour du nom donné par le peintre Paul Gauguin à sa demeure.

Painter Paul Gauguin called his home in the Marquesas Islands the *Maison du Jouir*. It was, according to art expert Caroline Boyle-Turner, a place where “music, drink, ribald humour, parties and a libertine attitude towards visiting young women filled many evenings”. Across the web the prevalent translation seems to be House of Pleasure, but we also find House of Sexual Pleasure, House of Delight, House of Orgasm, House of Come, House of Love, House of Bliss and House of Joy. In light of the venereal interpretations, does such a tame euphemism as “pleasure” really do justice to the idea Gauguin wanted to convey?

Through the lens of metaphrase, or word-for-word translation, we can without hesitation turn *maison* into “house” and *du* into “of the”. However, and not unsurprisingly, the word *jouir* is open to a wider interpretation. Simply by consulting the excellent French dictionary *Trésor de la Langue Française* (TLF), published by the CNRS at <http://www.cnrtl.fr>, we discover two principal definitions (*avoir du plaisir, posséder*) and a rich vein of synonyms (*savourer, se délecter, déguster, se réjouir, posséder, goûter, disposer, bénéficier, avoir, se régaler, se repaître, s'envoyer en l'air, profiter, prendre son pied, partir, jubiler, apprécier, user*). For the most part these synonyms point to the English verb “enjoy” both in the sense of experiencing pleasure (*savourer, se délecter, déguster*, etc.) and possessing (*posséder, avoir*). The coarser synonyms *s'envoyer en l'air* and *prendre son pied*, which mean “to fornicate”, derive from a secondary meaning of the word which the TLF describes as *éprouver le plaisir sexuel jusqu'à son aboutissement* or, to be blunt, “to orgasm”. Enjoy, fornicate, orgasm? The general theme is pretty clear!

And yet these words are all verbs, whereas the *jouir* of *maison du jouir* is not a verb (*de jouir*) but a noun (*du jouir*). It is also an unusual noun, one that does not appear in small or medium-

sized dictionaries, and to which the twenty-volume TLF pays scant attention, telling us that it has an equally unusual synonym, *jouissement*, and is the action of *jouir*. What motivated Gauguin's choice? To add a bit of mystery? To keep it short? The latter is quite possible because, while carving the words into a frieze above the main entrance, he perhaps needed to economize space and the noun usually associated with the verb *jouir* is indeed a longish word: *jouissance* (pleasure, use, orgasm). Also, we cannot rule out that Gauguin could have been using *jouir* as a short form of *jouisseur* (hedonist). Keeping our options open, we can translate these terms respectively as “enjoying” and “enjoyer” without losing the connotations of “having pleasure” and “possessing”. Unfortunately “enjoy” does not readily evoke “orgasm”, unlike *jouir/jouissance*, so in terms of metaphrastic translation, our offerings must surely be threefold: “House of the Enjoying” or “House of the Enjoyer” or “House of the Orgasm”.

Of the above, the first two do not sound very natural in English – even if we omit the article – and the third is perhaps too specific, so we might, for stylistic reasons and the need to choose a single translation, legitimately paraphrase the ideas they convey with any one of a number of words. Here are some strong contenders:

- pleasure: covers “enjoying” but has no connotation of “possessing” or “orgasm” (and Gauguin could have carved the words “Maison du Plaisir” if that is what he wanted to say);
- joy: etymologically linked to *jouir*, evocative of a climactic moment but lacks the idea of “possessing”;
- fun: lacks the notions of possessing and reaching a climax;
- gratification: conveys enjoyment, pleasure, both giving and receiving, but lacks “possessing”;
- love: less specific than “orgasm”, supposes “enjoying” and “possessing” but lacks a certain lasciviousness that seems to emanate from Gauguin;
- sex: undeniably evokes all three qualities of *jouir*, devoid of euphemism, but lacks poetry (it is worth noting that to say “house of sex” in a French phrase, without falling into four-letter vulgarity, is quite long-winded (*maison des rapports sexuels*)).

If we wish to imitate *Maison du Jouis* in English, we might put aside facets of its meaning to concentrate on what some English native speaker might have carved in that plaque if he or she were Gauguin. Alliteration is a very convincing solution, such as Hedonist House, Sex Shack, Joy Joint, etc. Or we could simply make it more zippy, as in The Pleasure Hut. It has also been suggested that *maison du jouir* is a slang term for “brothel” but I have been unable to corroborate this, although a similar term does indeed exist in *maison close*. If this is what Gauguin intended, the translator could go with The Brothel (blunt and direct), The Bordello (similar to the French *bordel*) or even The Whorehouse (rather harsh for some ears). Perhaps the best candidate in this approach would be The Joy House, a term which comes from the Oxford English Dictionary whose hallowed pages state that such slang for a “house of ill repute” has been employed by, among other writers, Raymond Chandler.



In *jouir* we are undeniably dealing with a sexually charged word combining, in a very direct way, the notions of pleasure, possession and sexual climax. From what we know of the man, it seems unlikely that Gauguin would have reverted to euphemisms such as “pleasure”, “joy” or “fun” to get his point across, although at the same time he was cultivated enough to avoid coarser vocabulary. From a purely grammatical standpoint we cannot be sure if he intended to convey to visitors that his house was *providing enjoyment*, *a venue for enjoying*, or *open to those who enjoy*. Lastly, it is possible that he jokingly likened his home to a brothel, and the word *maison* is sufficient on its own to convey this in French. So what would Gauguin have carved above the door of his Marquesan hut if he had been an English speaker? In light of the above, and of other mottoes attributed to him, such as *Ici on fait l’amour* (Here we make love) and *Soyez amoureuses, vous serez heureuses* (Be in love and you will be happy), a pretty safe bet seems to be: House of Love.

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